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Blind Spots in Work-Life Research through a Global Lens: Toward a Model of Intersectionality, Diversity and Inclusion

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A faculty member woman immigrant from an Asian country, requests a meeting with the Dean regarding a personal matter. She is a productive researcher and a stellar faculty member. During the meeting, she shares that her mother-in-law was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. She is requesting family leave to fly to her home country and care for her mother-in-law. The Dean asks if there are other family members living near by. The faculty member notes that her husband has two younger sisters who live in the same city as the mother. The Dean lifts an eyebrow and says “so why do *you* need to be there?”

Work-life research in the past several decades has contributed a great deal to our knowledge base (e.g., Kinman, G., & Jones, F., 2008, Shek, et al 2018). Yet this research has suffered limitations due to its focus on certain forms of labor – primarily employees in work organizations – and on certain aspects of family and life -- mostly traditional western. In their thorough review of the research at the juncture of work life, diversity and inclusion, Ozbilgin et al., 2011 highlight the importance of examining areas that previous research has overlooked. The authors advocate for research that would utilize broader definitions of the terms ‘work’ and ‘life’ and open up this body of research to more diverse and inclusive human life experiences. Academic life is a case in point that demonstrates this complexity. Research findings from several countries suggest that academic employment has become more stressful with serious consequences for the workforce and the quality of higher education (Kinman & Jones, 2008). Expanding our understanding of what ‘work’ and ‘life’ mean to non-traditional groups, while finding new ways to address those differences, will help to reconcile the work-life conundrum in an increasingly diverse and global workforce, and to foster a climate of inclusion in organizations (Mor Barak, 2017). This paper identifies blind spots in work-life research and offers a conceptual model for future research by using intersectionality theory to examine diversity of work and life experiences, adding a global lens for further depth of analysis.

Background and Theoretical Framework

One of the most significant problems facing today's diverse workforce is that of exclusion -- the reality experienced by many and the perception of even greater numbers of employees that they are *not* viewed by top management as an integral part of the organization (Mor Barak, 2017). The inclusion-exclusion continuum is central to the discussion in this paper and is defined as: "... the individual's sense of being a part of the organizational system in both the formal processes, such as access to information and decision-making channels, and the informal processes. (Mor Barak, 2000b, 2006). Shore et al., (2011) refined the definition by highlighting the two axis that comprise inclusion: belongingness and uniqueness. Simply put, people want a sense of belonging to the organization while, at the same time, they wish to be recognized for who they really are as individuals. They do not want to give up their unique characteristics for the sense of belonging (assimilation), nor do they want to give up their sense of belongingness in holding on to their unique characteristics (exclusion).

Intersectionality theory provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between work-life, diversity and inclusion in organizations. The theory highlights the importance of viewing the overlap between different forms of social inequality, oppression, discrimination and exclusion to create a multidimensional picture diversity (Crenshaw, 1989; Lutz, Herrera Vivar, & Supik, 2011; Mor Barak, 2017, Ch. 7; Icaza Garza, R. A., & Vázquez, R. 2017). Furthermore, it addresses the combined inequalities associated with characteristics such as class, gender and race and their association with access to power in the organizational and societal structure (Acker, 2006; Mahalingam, 2007). Intersectionality challenges the notion that social problems can be broken down into separate issues that only affect specific identity groups, such as focusing only on race or gender and ignoring the overlap of these two identities. Accordingly, the "single axis framework" in which discrimination and oppression are framed in terms of discrete categories creates artificial boundaries, encourages mutually exclusive interests, and promotes inter-group conflict (Crenshaw, 1989; Cho et al., 2013; Wells et al., 2015; Macias, & Stephens, 2017).

Intersectionality theory, therefore, promotes the idea that each person experiences bias in a unique way because each simultaneously carries multiple and complex identities and these identities interact with each other (Crenshaw, 1989; McBride et al., 2015). The notion that singular characteristics, such as gender or marital status, cannot adequately capture the human experience with respect to power, central to intersectionality theory, is the very characteristic that makes this theory particularly suitable to understanding the connection between work-life, diversity and inclusion. For that reason, Ozbilgin et al. (2011) have argued that the

intersectional approach is useful in addressing areas that have previously been overlooked by work-life research.

Identifying Overlooked Research Areas

Upon reviewing the work-life literature, it is clear that there is need to expand the definitions of the 'work' and 'life' domain, using intersectionality theory and applying a global lens, to understand the experience of inclusion or exclusion in work organizations. To illustrate the issues, I highlight below specific areas that work-life research has overlooked or sparsely examined.

Emerging as a distinct domain in the 1990's, work-life research has focused primarily on women's issues in more traditional, white middle class concerns. Though the research domain has evolved into work-life with expanded focus, it has not yet been able to capture the full spectrum of the life experiences, nor the variety of work experiences, of today's diverse and global workforce. For example, research still mostly focuses on traditional models of white middle-class families with attention to the needs and expectations of married women who are mothers and caregivers (Ollier-Malaterre, & Foucreault, 2017; Ozbilgin, 2011). Expanded emphasis needs to be placed on the needs of men, single people, non-traditional families, and families of immigrants (e.g., Wilkinson, Tomlinson, & Gardiner, 2017). The latter is particularly important for life in academia as scholars sometimes emigrate from one country to another following career opportunity and partners may resort to living apart long distance to accommodate independent careers.

A second neglected area is that of defining life outside of family demands and expectations. This expansion needs to include such areas as leisure/self-care, religious affiliations, community involvement, volunteer commitments, life responsibilities of single persons, unpaid domestic work and other personal activities and needs (Ollier-Malaterre, & Foucreault, 2017; Ozbilgin et al, 2011). Some aspects that are specifically relevant to academics are the "spillover" and lack of boundaries between work and life (Bell, Rajendran & Theiler, 2012). This flexibility, typically considered an advantage for work-life balance, also means that with work always pressing and available, academics are sometimes not available to family members, to civic engagement, religious activities, or to enjoy leisure time. It is not unusual for an academic to send an email to a group of colleagues after midnight on a weekend and to receive responses at the same time.

Toward a Model of Intersectionality, Work-Life and Inclusion in the Workplace

To address gaps in the work-life research, I am proposing a conceptual model based on intersectionality that connects work-life and inclusion as depicted in Figure 1.

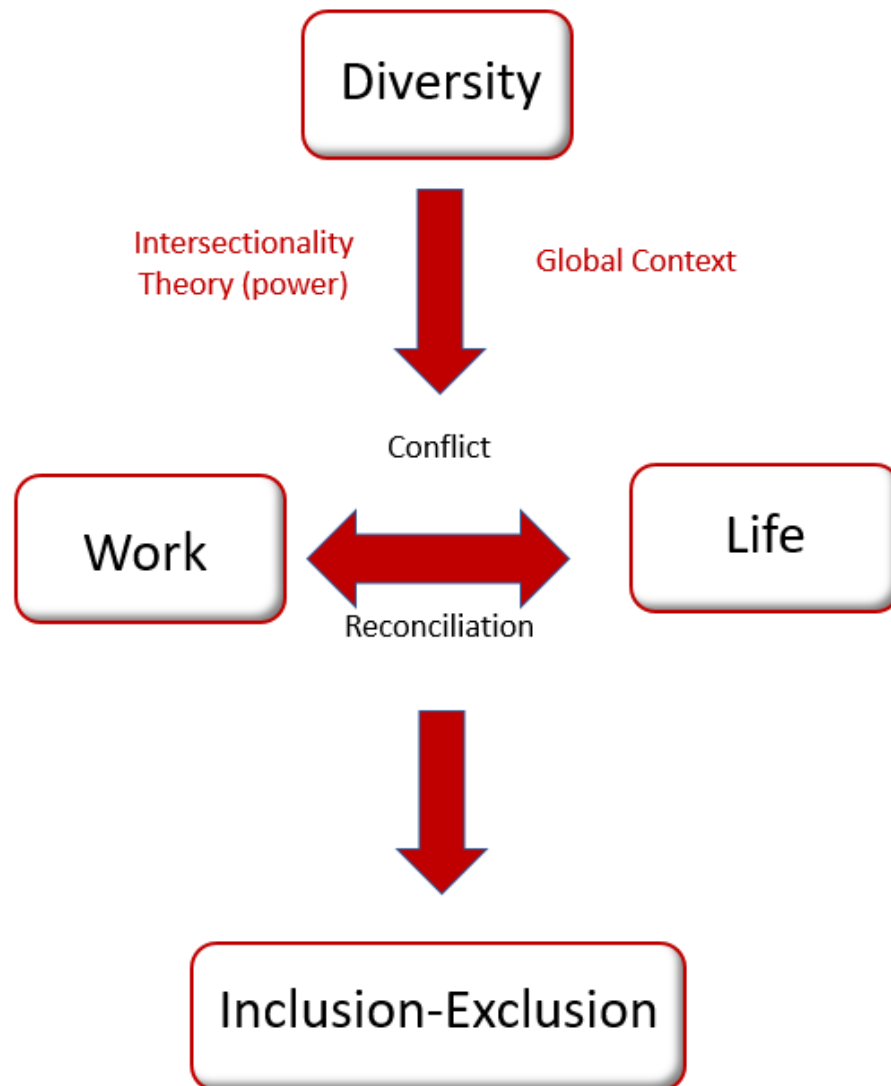


Figure 1: Theoretical Perspectives on Diversity, Intersectionality, Work-Life and Inclusion

This model is particularly relevant to academia in which job flexibility is typically available but does not necessarily promote work-life balance. For example, a study on stress and work-life among Australian academics found that taking work home to complete unfinished tasks was common among the study participants leading them to have less time to dedicate to home life and led to increased work-life conflict (Bell, Rajendran & Theiler 2012). Future research should focus on expanding the domains of work and life to explore issues of intersectionality and power structures and their relationship to exclusion. These are abundantly evident in academia in which the stratified power structure is often tied to intersectionality because academics who are members of one or more underrepresented groups are typically less likely to be among the

more privileged academic groups and to experience exclusion (Zimmerman, Carter-Sowell, & Xu, 2016). Future research should focus on expanding the domains of both work and life. It should be informed by intersectionality theory to examine the relationship between diversity, work-life experiences and individual perceptions of inclusion or exclusion in the workplace.

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